

Chicago Tribune

OPINION/COMMENTARY

John T. Shaw: Our nation needs muscular rhetoric and problem-solving statesmanship



Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel speaks at the Democratic National Convention at the United Center in Chicago on Aug. 21, 2024. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

By [JOHN T. SHAW](#)

September 10, 2024

I attended the recent [Democratic National Convention](#) and was struck, as were others, by the abundance of stirring political oratory, not only from midcareer politicians but also from so many younger leaders of the party.

Gov. Wes Moore of Maryland and U.S. Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Jasmine Crockett of Texas and Veronica Escobar of Texas were deeply impressive. So

were several U.S. Senate candidates including Angela Alsobrooks of Maryland and U.S. Rep. Andy Kim of New Jersey. And let's not forget Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel and Michigan state Sen. Mallory McMorrow. The list goes on.

These young leaders refute the popular notion that American politics is in inexorable decline and that talented people are avoiding public life.

Evocative and elevated political rhetoric is a rare and powerful tool. Adeptly deployed, it can frame challenges, outline solutions and, most importantly, inspire people to act. My abiding hope is that in the coming years, this generation of leaders will channel their formidable political and rhetorical skills into governing excellence — into statesmanship.

One of the unspoken tragedies of our current political moment is we spend far too much time and energy talking about former President Donald Trump and far too little time and energy discussing the staggering policy challenges that confront us. Climate change, the national debt, immigration, income inequality and racial tensions threaten American society. But these hugely consequential issues are scarcely explored in a substantive way on either the campaign trail or in the halls of Congress.

Consider the federal deficit issue.

As a congressional reporter in Washington, I covered multiple deficit reduction negotiations in the 1990s that culminated in three years of budget surpluses and a serious discussion about the possibility of paying off the entire national debt, which in 1999 totaled \$5.7 trillion. But policymakers grew complacent, approving large tax cuts and new spending programs, which added to the deficit. Then emergency funds were required to address crises such as 9/11, the 2008 financial meltdown and the pandemic. The federal budget fell wildly out of balance.

The United States now has annual budget deficits of more than \$1.5 trillion, and our debt has ballooned to \$35 trillion. The interest payments alone on the federal debt approach \$900 billion annually and will exceed \$1 trillion next year. This is more than we spend on the entire defense budget.

Obviously, we are not going to solve the debt problem merely with elevated rhetoric. But we do need clear and compelling explanations from our leaders to build public

support for the collective sacrifice that will be necessary to confront this and equally pressing problems. Candid discussions, tough negotiations and sound solutions will require formidable rhetorical and political skills — and world-class statesmanship.

It is imperative that the young leaders whose words lifted the rafters of the United Center last month continue to develop and deploy the governing skills to tackle these problems.

Former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo famously said: “You campaign in poetry. You govern in prose.” America desperately needs uplifting political poetry and exceptional governing prose. We need spirit lifters and problem solvers. We need this young generation, in both parties, to rise to the occasion. We need statesmen and stateswomen.

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